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Exposition of the Apostles Creed

James Dodds

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EXPOSITION
OF
THE APOSTLES' CREED

By
THE REV. JAMES DODDS, D.D.

Though I am an old Doctor of Divinity, to this day I have not got beyond the children's learning—the Ten Commandments, the Belief, and the Lord's Prayer; and these I understand not so well as I should, though I study them daily, praying with my son John and my daughter Magdalen.—LUTHER'S Table-Talk.

CONTENTS

EDITORIAL NOTE

PREFATORY NOTE

INTRODUCTION

ARTICLE 1

I BELIEVE IN GOD THE FATHER ALMIGHTY, MAKER OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

SECTION

1. I BELIEVE
2. GOD
3. THE FATHER
4. ALMIGHTY
5. MAKER OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

ARTICLE 2

AND IN JESUS CHRIST HIS ONLY SON OUR LORD

SECTION

1. AND IN JESUS CHRIST
2. JESUS
3. CHRIST
4. HIS ONLY SON
5. OUR LORD

ARTICLE 3

WHO WAS CONCEIVED BY THE HOLY GHOST, BORN OF THE VIRGIN MARY

ARTICLE 4

SUFFERED UNDER PONTIUS PILATE, WAS CRUCIFIED, DEAD, AND BURIED

SECTION

1. SUFFERED UNDER PONTIUS PILATE
2. WAS CRUCIFIED
3. DEAD
4. AND BURIED

ARTICLE 5

HE DESCENDED INTO HELL, THE THIRD DAY HE ROSE AGAIN FROM THE DEAD

SECTION

1. HE DESCENDED INTO HELL
2. THE THIRD DAY HE ROSE AGAIN FROM THE DEAD

ARTICLE 6

HE ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN AND SITTETH ON THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD THE FATHER ALMIGHTY

ARTICLE 7

FROM THENCE HE SHALL COME TO JUDGE THE QUICK AND THE DEAD

ARTICLE 8

I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY GHOST

ARTICLE 9

THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH, THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

SECTION

1. THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH
2. THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

ARTICLE 10

THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

ARTICLE 11

THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY

ARTICLE 12

AND THE LIFE EVERLASTING

APPENDIX

FOOTNOTES

**SOME BOOKS ON THE APOSTLES' CREED OR BEARING UP-
ON ARTICLES THEREOF**

EDITORIAL NOTE

Dr. Dodds' *Exposition of the Apostles' Creed* will supply a real need. It contains a careful, well-informed, and well-balanced statement of the doctrines of the Church which are expressed or indicated in the Creed, and it will be helpful to many as arranging the passages of Scripture on which these doctrines rest. Though historical references could have been easily made, the Editors agree with the author in thinking that to insert them in the discussion of doctrines would have probably perplexed the readers for whom the book is designed.

February 1896.

PREFATORY NOTE

The title and purpose of this Handbook limit its subject matter to an exposition of the doctrines which have place in the summary of belief termed the Apostles' Creed. It is not meant to cover the whole field of Christian doctrine.

A history of the Creed has not been attempted. There is much that is interesting in its origin and growth. It did not come into existence all at once, but was built up from time to time by the insertion of clauses formulated by Councils or by leading representatives of the Christian Church. The space available is not sufficient to include a history.

The Handbook being not controversial but expository, references to the heretics and heresies that gave occasion for the articles which have place in the Creed are few and brief.

JAMES DODDS.

THE APOSTLES' CREED

INTRODUCTION

While the disciples had Jesus with them, there was no occasion for a formal summary of the doctrines which His followers were called to accept and to maintain. He was present to resolve all doubts and settle all difficulties, so that when their faith was assailed or their teaching impugned they could refer to Him. Then, as now, faith had Him for its object, — with this difference, that He was visibly at hand to counsel and to direct, while now He is passed into the heavens and guides His people into all truth, not by personal instruction but by His invisible though ever present Spirit.

Another reason why Jesus gave His disciples no creed may be found in the fact that His work was not finished until He had laid down His life, and that no creed could have been satisfactory which did not cover those great unfulfilled events in His history that lie at the foundation of the Christian religion.

Jesus did indeed require belief in Himself as a condition on which healing and salvation were bestowed. Unbelief hindered His work, while faith in His Messianic claims and mission never failed to secure a rich blessing to those who confessed Him. The faith which He recognised was not the acceptance and confession of a summary of doctrine such as any of the Creeds now existing, but a simple statement of belief in Himself as the Son of God and the Messiah. On one occasion only does He appear to have called for a confession which went further than this, when, having declared to Martha the great doctrine of Resurrection, He put to her the question, "Believest thou this?"^[001]

After His death and resurrection, when Jesus charged His disciples to preach the Gospel, He bade them teach their followers to observe all things whatsoever He had commanded them.^[002] The Apostles, accordingly, appear to have furnished the leaders of the churches they planted with summaries of doctrine, such as we find in the fifteenth chapter of Paul's first Epistle to the Corinthians.^[003]

Paul seems to refer to such a summary when he writes to the Romans commending them for obedience to the "form of doctrine" which was delivered them,^[004] and when he bestows his benediction on those Galatians who walked according to "this rule."^[005] It was, doubtless, such a compendium of doctrine he had in view when he charged Timothy to "keep that which was committed to his trust," contrasting this "deposit" with "profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called."^[006] The bearing of this charge is made more emphatic when it is repeated by the Apostle in connection with the exhortation, "Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus."^[007]

It would thus appear that from Apostolic times there existed a form of words of the character of a creed, which, for some reason, came to be jealously guarded and concealed from all who were not Christians. It was perhaps Paul's reference to the summary of doctrine as a "deposit" to be carefully kept, that led the early converts to regard it as a private possession—a trust to be hidden in the heart and covered from unfriendly eyes. The Apostle did not mean that it should be so regarded, but this interpretation given to his words, or some other cause, led to its being used as a watchword rather than as an open confession, the consequence of which is that in the writings of the earliest Christian fathers no statement of doctrines corresponding to a creed is found.

The absence of creeds or of allusions to them in the oldest Christian treatises gives seeming point to the objection urged by Professor Harnack and others against the Apostles' Creed as now held and interpreted by the Church, that it is not a correct summary of early Christian belief. That such objections are not well founded will become apparent as the various articles of the Creed are considered in the light of Apostolic teaching. The absence of creeds in early Christian writings is sufficiently accounted for by the care with which the summary was cherished as a secret trust, to be treasured in the memory but not to be written or otherwise profaned by publicity.

The word "creed" — derived from the Latin "*credo*, I believe" — is, in its ecclesiastical sense, used to denote a summary or concise statement of doctrines formulated and accepted by a church. Although

usually connected with religious belief, it has a wider meaning, and designates the principles which an individual or an associated body so holds that they become the springs and guides of conduct. Some sects of Christians reject formal creeds and profess to find the Scriptures sufficient for all purposes that creeds are meant to serve. The Christian religion rests on Christ, and the final appeal on any question of doctrine must be to the Scriptures which testify of Him: but it is found that very different conclusions are often reached by those who profess to ground their beliefs upon the same passages of the Word of God. Almost every heresy that has disturbed the unity of the Church has been advocated by men who appealed to Scripture in confirmation of the doctrines they taught. The true teaching of the Word of God is gathered from careful and continuous searching of the Scriptures, and there is danger of fatal error when conclusions are drawn from isolated passages interpreted in accordance with preconceived opinions. It has been found not only expedient but needful that the Christian Churches should set forth in creeds and confessions the doctrines which they believe the Scriptures affirm. They are bound not only to accept Scripture as the rule of faith, but to make known the sense in which they understand it. As unlearned and unstable men wrest and subvert the Sacred Writings, it is fitting that those who are learned and not unstable should publish sound expositions of their contents. In the light of creeds, converts are enabled to test their own position, and to put to proof the claims of those who profess to be teachers of Christian doctrine.

One of the most widely accepted of these forms is the Apostles' Creed, so called, not because it was drawn up by, or in the time of, the Apostles—although there is a tradition to the effect that each of them contributed a clause—but because it is in accordance with the sum of Apostolic teaching. The history of this Creed is not easily traced. The care with which it was guarded excluded it from the writings of the early fathers, and it is impossible, therefore, to assign to their proper dates, with certainty, some of the articles of which it is composed. This, however, is evident, that it came gradually into existence, clauses being added from time to time to guard the faithful against false doctrine, or to enable them to defend the orthodox belief. It appears to have been the general creed of the Christian Church, in a form very similar to that which it now bears, from the

close of the second century.^[008] At that time and afterwards it served not only as a test of Christian doctrine, but was also used by catechists in training and instructing candidates for admission to the Church.

It is sometimes urged as an objection to this Creed that it is not a sufficiently comprehensive summary of Christian doctrine. Those who object to it on this ground should consider the purpose of creeds. They were not meant to cover the whole field of Christian faith, but to fortify believers against the teaching of heretics. The Apostles' Creed was not intended, and does not profess, to state all the things that Christians ought to believe. There is no reference in it to Scripture, to Inspiration, to Prayer, or to the Sacraments. It sets forth in a few words, distinct and easily remembered, the existence and relations to men of the three Persons of the Godhead—those facts and truths on which all doctrine and duty rest, and from which they find development.

It is especially objected that there is no reference in this Creed to the atoning work of the Lord Jesus Christ. But, though not directly expressed, this doctrine is really and substantially contained in it. The Creed is the confession of those whose bond of union is common faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as their Saviour. The articles which treat of Him and of His sufferings and work are intelligible only to those who believe in the reality and efficacy of the Atonement.

The Creed contains twelve articles, and to each of these, and to every part of it, the words "I believe" belong. One article relates to God the Father, six to God the Son, one to God the Holy Ghost, and four to the Holy Catholic Church and the privileges secured to its members. These articles are—

1. I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.
2. And in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord,
3. Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary,

4. Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried,
5. He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead,
6. He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
7. From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
8. I believe in the Holy Ghost,
9. The Holy Catholic Church; the Communion of saints;
10. The Forgiveness of sins;
11. The Resurrection of the body,
12. And the Life Everlasting.

In estimating the value of creeds in the early ages of the Christian Church, it is important to bear in mind that the converts were almost wholly dependent on oral instruction for their knowledge of Divine truth. Copies of the Old and New Testaments existed in manuscript only. These were few in number, and the cost of production placed them beyond the reach of the great majority. A single copy served for a community or a district in which the Hebrew or the Greek tongue was understood, but in localities where other languages were in use the living voice was needed to make revelation known. It is only since the invention of printing and the application of the steam-engine to the economical and rapid production of books, and since modern linguists have multiplied the translations of the Bible, that it has become in their own tongues accessible to believers in all lands, available for private perusal and family reading. It was therefore a necessity that Christians should possess "a form of sound words," comprehensive enough to embody the leading doctrines of Christianity, yet brief enough to be easily committed to memory.

ARTICLE 1

1. I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth

SECTION 1. — I BELIEVE

The Creed is the expression of personal belief. Whether spoken in private or in a public assembly, it is the confession of the faith held by each individual for himself. Each of us has a separate life, and each of us must personally accept God's message and express his own belief. Religion must influence men as units before it can benefit them in masses. Faith that saves is a gift of God which every one must receive for himself. The faith of one is of no avail for another, therefore the Creed begins with the affirmation "*I believe.*" In repeating it we profess our own faith in what God has revealed concerning Himself.

"*I believe.*"—The Apostles' Creed is a declaration of things which are most surely believed among us, and its several parts or articles are founded upon the contents of Scripture, which is our one rule of faith. It does not begin with the words *I think* or *I know*, but with the statement "*I believe.*" "Belief" is used in various senses, but here it means the assent of the mind and heart to the doctrines expressed in the Creed. When we repeat the form we declare that we accept and adopt all the statements which it covers. "With the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made."^[009]

Faith differs from knowledge. There are some things which we know to be true, and there are others of which we say we believe them to be true. There are certain truths which are termed axiomatic. When the terms in which they are expressed are understood, the truth they convey is at once admitted. We know that two and two make four, we know that two straight lines cannot enclose a space; but we do not know in the same sense those things which the Creed affirms. It deals with statements that, for the most part, have never been, and cannot be, tested by sense, and that cannot be demonstrated by such proof as will compel us to accept them. We believe them, not because it is impossible to withhold our assent, nor only